

The Grim Test

By A. S. M. Hutchinson

Illustrated by J. Scott Williams

HE was made to be loved. In her face were red roses beneath cream roses; in her eyes were violets; in her laugh was a silver bell. Her name was Elsie; she was an orphan; she lived all alone; she worked very hard for a very poor living; her years were twenty-two.

James, who had moderate wealth, considerable fame and numerous acquaintances, had also enormous loneliness.

"Why the dickens is it?" said James. "My fault, of course," said James. "Nothing matters to me. That's what the trouble is. Except my work, my thing and no person really and truly matters."

"All the same—," said James, and sighed. James did not merely think that nothing and nobody mattered to him; James knew it, and he knew it by application (especially to persons) of a test which he had formulated upon himself, and whereby he tested the true depth of his affections.

This test was a grim, a harsh, almost a brutal test. It was "I like so-and-so. I like so-and-so very much indeed. But would I care if so-and-so died?"

The answer invariably was that in the sense in which James meant it, he would not care.

Now his work mattered very much to James, and, painting one day a picture in which ribbons were worn by one of his models, James, determined to have only the exact shades of ribbon that only himself could choose, went one day to the ribbon counter of a shop and there fussed enough to drive mad the girl who attended upon him.

Did it drive her mad? No. She was as sweet of disposition as she was lovely of countenance. She was Elsie.

"I'm afraid I have been a most awful nuisance," said James.

"Oh, really, no," said Elsie.

"I have, though," said James, and looking at Elsie, saw that she was coming.

"You haven't, indeed?" declared Elsie.

"I have, though," repeated James, smiling.

"Oh, really, no," repeated Elsie, smiling. "Indeed not."

"I wanted the ribbons for a particular purpose," said James, smiling.

"Oh, I could see that," said Elsie, and looked over so prettily the silver bell that was her laugh.

"Ha, ha," laughed James, lamely, and proceeded lamely to remove himself.

"You've forgotten your parcel," cried Elsie.

"Good heavens!" cried James; and in appalling confusion left the shop.

"Dash!" said James.

FOUR days later, being the Sabbath, James, mounting to the outside of a motor bus, found but one seat vacant thereon and that the passenger beside him was Elsie.

"Hullo!" said James.

The red roses on the face of Elsie spread above the cream roses.

Fifteen minutes after James discovered himself to be walking in Hyde Park with Elsie. "You know," said James, "I've never done a thing like this in my life before."

"Nor I," said Elsie. "Isn't it funny?"

"By Jove, it is funny," said James seriously.

James never, though James did not know it, almost the first words they had exchanged since entering the park, and in silence for rather more than a quarter of a mile they debated, in their several ways, the funniness on which they had found themselves in agreement.

"But you said," then said James, "that you said that you walk here every Sunday and every Saturday afternoon?"

"Yes, but by myself," said Elsie.

"Ah," said James.

Three hundred and thirty-two yards farther, "Not with any one," said Elsie.

"Ah," said James.

These "Ah's" of James were uttered very profoundly and weightily and were intended by James to be charged with enormous meaning, as indeed they must have been, for James, in this most remarkable situation in which he found himself, was thinking enormously and "Ah," pronounced at long intervals, was almost the sole articulation by which James, throughout the afternoon, discharged or relieved the accumulation of thoughts thus amassed. Nor were the contributions of Elsie to the debate of much greater dimension.

The whole conversation between James and Elsie during their solemn circumnavigation of the park could have been written on a half-sheet of notepaper. Neither, it will be remembered, had ever done this kind of thing before.

They did it, however, a second, third, fourth and fifth time, but the less they talked and the more they walked the more were their meetings looked forward to by James.

"I hope you don't mind my not talking," said James, in the course of one walking, to Elsie.

"Not a bit," said Elsie.

"Ah," said James.

And on the occasion of the next walking, "As I was saying about not talking," said James. "I like being with you and feeling that you don't mind if I don't talk. Always when I'm with any one I feel that I've got to talk, and I never can talk, and the thing is simply an agony to me. It's difficult to understand, and I never can make any one understand it. I do hope," concluded James, exhausted, "that you understand?"

"I understand perfectly," said Elsie.

"Ah," said James.

AND, returning home that night, "This girl," reflected James, "delights my eye and soothes, pleases, comforts and altogether satisfies my mind. Much more than all this, she understands me. Am I in love with her?"

"Would I care," said James, applying his test, "really and truly and deeply and poignantly care, if she died? If I went to the park tomorrow and learned that she was dead and that I never again should see her, I should be sorry; yes, by Jove, I would indeed be most frightfully sorry, but would I go without my meals, would I crumk my work, would I feel that for me the end of the world had come and that I desired never again to eat, to work, or to sleep? Now then, would I?"

"No," said James. "I would not," obviously," said James, "I am not in love with her."

"Dash it!" said James, "I am not in love, and it is quite clear to me that at this rate I never shall be in love."

"But can I," browsed James, "by no means contrive it? I imagine subjects for my paintings and these, on my canvases, I contrive; why, imagining the bliss of love, should not I by artifice contrive it? The reason," browsed James, "is because, whereas in my painting the creatures of my imagination understand me and gladly suffer me to work upon them my artifice, in this matter of imagining myself in love there is required a living personage who could not possibly understand me and could not, therefore—"

"But wait," browsed James. "Elsie does understand me. Now, if I were to explain to her—By golly," said James, "I believe she would understand."

James, in all this time, had never communicated to Elsie any other name than James. It was the unique charm (to James) of Elsie that she was perfectly content merely to meet him and to pace with him in, for the most part, silence.

"There's a thing that I've been thinking about," said James, "and it is that I believe—I believe we ought to go and have some tea somewhere together. Oughtn't we?"

"Oh, I'd love to," said Elsie.

"Where?" said James.

"Well, where?" said Elsie.

Beginning with the Ritz and descending by stages to a coffee-stall known unto him in Camden Town, there passed through the imagination of James about two dozen houses of refreshment, but in none of them could James, unaccustomed to this kind of thing, imagine himself with Elsie. Ten minutes having passed in this desolating review—

"I tell you what wouldn't be so bad," said James, "I've got the run of a man's studio not far from here where sometimes I go for tea, and where they give you not half a bad tea. What about that?"

"Oh, that would be lovely," said Elsie. "What he mind though—your friend?"

"Not a bit," said James, and they proceeded silent through the park to the main road, and thence to the house of James and to the studio attached to the house of James.

With his key James opened the private door of the studio.

"Oh, it's lovely!" cried Elsie, "it's perfectly adorable; I've never imagined such a place!"

"Not bad," said James.

"And are those," cried Elsie, looking round, "your friend's pictures?" She moved, obviously entranced, from canvas to canvas, gazing at the walls, some hanging, one or two on easels. "Why, they're wonderful, they're wonderful!" she cried.

"Not bad," said James, fidgeting. He had overlooked, in inviting Elsie to the studio, the possibilities now afoot, and the possibilities now afoot disquieted him and alarmed him.

"Oh, it's lovely!" cried Elsie, "it's perfectly adorable; I've never imagined such a place!"

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Elsie, "and awfully nice. There's no one I love to see at work more than painters, brightening up places as they do. But, if you paint railings and that, I don't see what sort of help you can be to a man like James Prince."

JAMES was here able to set his feet on firm and true ground. None other than James was permitted to touch the painting materials of James. "I wash his brushes for him," said James, "and clean his palettes and all that sort of thing."

"I see," said Elsie, and nodded and bit largely with perfect teeth into a golden muffin.

James was ravished. "This girl," said James to himself, "understands me. All the same if she were to die in that very chair—"

And a sigh was sighed by James. Elsie gazed very beautifully at James.

"You're not unhappy, are you?" said Elsie.

"Oh, no," said James, but hopelessly. "But you sighed?"

"Oh, I just sighed," said James. "I believe I know why you sighed," said Elsie.

James sat up to full attention. "My goodness, I hope you don't" cried James.

"I think you sighed," said Elsie, "at the sight of all this wealth, of all this comfort. You shouldn't," said Elsie; "you needn't."

"That's true," said James. "Of course it is," said Elsie brightly. "Money doesn't necessarily mean happiness."

"I believe you," said James. "What's your idea of happiness?"

The red roses among the cream roses very slightly deepened. "I couldn't tell you that," said Elsie. "Ah," said James.

A considerable silence followed this, then, "But I should like to know," said James.

The red roses ingulfed the cream roses. "I couldn't," said Elsie.

"Ah," said James.

In a tender voice, "Of course," said Elsie, "if you are poor like we are—you don't get paid very well for painting railings, do you?"

"I get practically nothing," said James with a great truth, "for painting railings."

"I thought not," said Elsie. "Of course, if you are poor like we are it would undoubtedly be most awfully nice to be rich."

"Ah," said James. "Of all the 'Ah's' ever uttered by James, and they were many, no Ah was charged with such profundity of thought as this Ah. James, by the words to which this Ah responded, was given a footing from the first stage of his experiment (namely the entertainment of Elsie to tea) to the second stage of his experiment, namely the introduction of the experiment to Elsie, and the Ah was the heavy and purposeful tread with which James trod from the one stage to the other stage.

"Ah," said James, and then, "Look here, I tell you what. Let's pretend that we are rich. Let's pretend that we are here because all this belongs to us."

"Oh, let's!" cried Elsie.

"Good," said James. "Do you mind," said James, "do you mind pretending it in my way?"

"Not a bit!" cried Elsie. "What is your way?"

"Well, my way," said James, "my way of pretending all this belongs to us is just to sit here and munch our tea and just imagine that it is ours and that there's no excitement about it because it simply is ours."

"Sort of sit and dream it?" asked Elsie.

"Absolutely," said James, and added apologetically, "It's just my way, you know."

"You know, I believe I understand your ways," said Elsie.

"Ah," said James. For a quarter of an hour in silence this dream—that all this belonged to them—was enormously enjoyed by James. Then said James, "There's just one thing—"

He stopped. He had raised his eyes to her face and what he saw upon the face of Elsie very much astonished him.

"I say," said James, "you're not crying, are you?"

Elsie sat up quickly. "Good gracious, no!" cried Elsie. She applied to each eye a handkerchief and smiled at James. "Aha! the same," said Elsie, "if I had been crying, it would have been—it would have been crying with happiness."

"With happiness?" questioned James.

"Oh, happiness," affirmed Elsie. "You've no idea how I'm simply loving this—this imagining."

"Are you?" said James. "Oh, loving it!" she sighed. Then spoke James robustly. "I'm not," said James.

"You're not?" cried Elsie. "Oh, I am sorry. Oh, do tell me why."

"I'm going to," said James. "I'm imagining that all this belongs to us and it's the happiest feeling I've had in months in years. But I want to imagine that you belong to me and that I belong to you. Do you mind if I imagine that?"

"Not a bit!" said Elsie quite simply. "Thanks most awfully," said James. "Absolutely imaginary, of course; not in the least real."

"Oh, absolutely," said Elsie. "In fact, you needn't imagine it at all, if you don't like," said James. "Oh, I quite see that," said Elsie. "Well, that's simply splendid," said James, inclining his back to the cushions.

THREE passed then for James the happiest half-hour that James had ever passed. He watched the lovely creature who sat beside him and imagined that she belonged to him and he to her. James was happy.

The half hour passed; the time arrived (Elsie said) for her to go. Now propounded James the experiment to which all this, though blissful, had been the trial or induction.

James having stated and Elsie having agreed that the afternoon had been the most blissful ever known, "Now," propounded James, "I want to suggest to you something like this that we have been enjoying, only more so. Very much more so," said James.

"Oh, yes," said Elsie. "You'll think me," said James. "But what I want most awfully is to be in love."

"Oh, yes," said Elsie. "And the dickens of it is," said James, "that I can get in love."

"I see," said Elsie. (She said it so beautifully, so simply and so understandingly that "No girl like this has ever before been created," reflected James. "All the same—") reflected James, and inwardly sighed.

"Quite," said Elsie, softly. "I say," said James, noticing the softness, "you're rather quiet this morning, aren't you? Not feeling rotten or anything, are you?"

"No," said Elsie, looking out. "Good," said James. "Well, I vote we start, then, shall we?"

She gave a sound that seemed to be of agreement.

"Do you mind," said James, "if I put my arm around you?"

She gave that sound.

James put his arm about her. "I rather think," said James, "it's the kind of thing one would do, in the circumstances."

Her body within his arm was stiff and did not yield. She said, and her voice was as if her throat required to be cleared, "It's not real, is it?"

"Absolutely not," said James.

JAMES WATCHED THE LOVELY CREATURE WHO SAT BESIDE HIM, AND IMAGINED THAT SHE BELONGED TO HIM AND HE TO HER. JAMES WAS HAPPY.

Illustrated by J. Scott Williams



Elsie turned her head away for a moment and then turned it back and nodded it.

"You're marvelous," said James; "you really are. By golly, we'll do it then. Next Sunday?"

"Yes, marvelous," said James; "the day should be spent as and to the ability of James, on a painter's wages, to afford the excursion. ('I shall draw five out of the savings bank,' said James. 'I've wanted this for years and years, and now it's actually come I don't see why I shouldn't spend some money on myself for once and do the thing properly.')"

And then James, with last words, separated from Elsie.

"What do you suppose," inquired James, opening the last words, "your attitude will be? I mean to say, shall you pretend, imagine, that you are in love with me?"

"It would make it more real for you, wouldn't it?" said Elsie.

"It most certainly would," said James.

"Well, I will, then," said Elsie. "You are a splendid creature!" said James.

"Not a bit," said Elsie. "I think I'll go now," and she went, rather suddenly.

NOW, said James, as, Sunday arrived, the train began to move, "before we begin let's just run over this and see that we know exactly where we are." (They were in a first-class carriage which James had reserved, but James meant more than that.) "Where we are is that we're just engaged and this is our first day together since our engagement, and we simply—we simply love. But it's absolutely understood between us that it isn't real at all. That all right?"

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